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# Do Ambiguous Normative Ingroup Members Increase Tolerance for Deviants?

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**Abstract.** Subjective group dynamics theory (Marques, Páez, & Abrams, 1998) proposes that deviant ingroup members who threaten the positive value of the group members' social identity are evaluated negatively. In an experiment, we investigated whether group members evaluate deviant ingroup members less negatively when the normative member's commitment to the ingroup is ambiguous. Participants evaluated one normative and one deviant ingroup or outgroup member. Two conditions were contrasted, in which the normative target showed high versus low commitment to the group. As predicted, the participants evaluated deviant ingroup targets more negatively and normative ingroup targets more positively than their respective outgroup counterparts – but only when the normative member's commitment to the ingroup was unambiguous. When presented with a normative member with ambiguous commitment, the deviant ingroup member was evaluated less negatively. We discuss these results in light of subjective group dynamics theory.

**Keywords:** deviance in groups, tolerance for deviance, black sheep effect, subjective group dynamics

Subjective group dynamics theory (SGDT; Marques, Páez, & Abrams, 1998; Pinto, Marques, Levine, & Abrams, 2010) proposes that group members evaluate deviant ingroup members negatively because they jeopardize the group's positive image and thus threaten the group members' social identity. According to Marques and Páez (1994), group members judge deviant ingroup members negatively in an attempt to maintain a positive social identity, and they judge normative ingroup members positively because they enhance social identity. In support of this idea, evidence on the black sheep effect (e.g., Marques & Páez, 1994; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988) shows that people judge desirable ingroup members more favorably and undesirable ingroup members more unfavorably than their respective outgroup counterparts, especially when their social identity is threatened or insecure (Marques, Páez, & Abrams, 1998; see also Marques, 2004; Marques & Páez, 2008).

Research on the black sheep effect has concentrated on the conditions under which deviant ingroup members represent a relevant threat, and normative ingroup members yield relevant support, to positive social identity. These conditions typically include the activation of a prescriptive focus on group members' behavior (Marques, Páez, et al., 1998), the existence of low intragroup cohesiveness around a violated norm (Marques, Abrams, & Serôdio, 2001), the lack of social validation of that norm outside the group (Marques et al., 2001), or the intragroup status of normative and deviant members (Pinto et al., 2010). In addition, the focus of such research was directed toward the negative impact of deviant members on group members' social identity. To our knowledge, no attention has been

paid to the role of normative members in this process. The present study attempts to fill this gap. We propose that the black sheep effect results not only because people recognize that deviant ingroup members threaten their social identity, but also because they recognize that normative ingroup members offer strong support for the norm that justifies a reaction against deviants.

Normative ingroup members are important because they inform about the appropriate behavior expected from group members (Marques, Abrams, Páez, & Martínez-Taboada, 1998). As a result, group members should only be more motivated to exert normative pressure on deviant ingroup members, as opposed to avoiding them, when there is high ingroup support for that norm (see also Frings, Abrams, Randsley de Moura, & Marques, 2010). Indeed, the adoption of a prescriptive focus toward deviant ingroup members would depend on the norm's perceived resilience to deviant threats. Such resilience should depend on whether salient members adopt normative conduct as well as the amount of perceived commitment of these members to the norm they embody.

As a rule, previous research characterized normative members as those who adopt socially desirable conduct, or endorse generic prescriptive norms (Marques et al., 2001), and simultaneously hold a positive orientation toward the group. This may have led participants to consider target members' desirable or undesirable behavior as the equivalent of their commitment or lack of commitment, respectively, to the group. However, we can conceive of situations in which group members adopt normative behavior while not being genuinely committed

to the group. Conversely, in other situations, group members may be genuinely committed to the group while adopting behavior deemed deviant by other group members (see Packer, 2008). Thus, in many social situations, the reaction to deviance may depend on the level of commitment that normative members exhibit. Therefore, it would be interesting to separate the normative component of the behavior from the level of group commitment of the member adopting such behavior, that is, to examine how the normative member's level of commitment to the group affects group members' judgments of normative and deviant members, as well as their stronger or weaker adherence to the norm.

In this investigation, we do not expect ambiguous normative members (i.e., members who adopt the expected normative behavior while showing little commitment to the group) to be perceived as providing normative support strong enough to activate a prescriptive focus. As a result, we do not expect to observe a black sheep effect under such conditions. Indeed, because of their lack of commitment to the group, ambiguous normative members should be perceived as being nonreferential for the ingroup's normative position. In this case, deviant ingroup members should be evaluated with relative leniency, and the normative members should not be evaluated more positively than in situations in which normative members' behavior and commitment to the group are in line with each other.

## Overview and Hypotheses

The participants were university students who were told that students from their university were involved in an evaluation of the Bologna Process. They were presented with one normative and one deviant target, both of which were either students from their own school of the university (ingroup) or another school of the university (outgroup). Depending on the experimental condition, the normative target either showed high (unambiguous condition) or low (ambiguous condition) commitment to their university.

In the unambiguous condition, we expected the participants to judge the deviant ingroup target more negatively than the deviant outgroup target, and to judge the normative ingroup target more positively than the normative outgroup target (black sheep hypothesis). However, in the ambiguous condition as compared to the unambiguous condition, we expected the participants to judge the normative ingroup targets less positively and the deviant ingroup targets less negatively. Following the same reasoning, we expected the participants to agree more with the normative targets and disagree more with the deviant targets in the ingroup/unambiguous condition than in the other conditions (agreement hypothesis). Finally, as the presence of an unambiguous normative target (in the ingroup/unambiguous condition) increases the likelihood that the normative po-

sition can be validated, we expected the differential agreement between the normative and deviant positions to be associated with evaluative differentiation between the normative and the deviant targets, especially in the ingroup/unambiguous condition. We expected evaluations of an ambiguous normative ingroup member to be negatively influenced by these members' lack of commitment to the group and thus less positive than evaluations of normative ingroup members whose normative behavior emerges along with a strong commitment to the group.

## Method

### Participants and Design

A total of 26 female and 22 male students ( $N = 48$ ) who were enrolled in one of two schools at the University of Porto (School of Arts or School of Architecture) participated in this experiment and were randomly assigned to conditions. We used a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  design (Group [ingroup, outgroup]  $\times$  Normative Targets' Commitment [unambiguous, ambiguous]  $\times$  Targets' Position [normative, deviant]); the first two were between-participants factors and the latter was a within-participant factor.

### Procedure

One experimenter informed participants that she was working for a department of their university whose mission was to track progress in the implementation of the Bologna Process. She proceeded to inform the participants that, as a part of this evaluation process, students would be invited to take part in a series of forthcoming group discussions on important aspects of the Bologna Process, and that student teams were being created for that purpose. Participants, the experimenter went on, were taking part in a validation process, in which they were asked to help establish whether the opinions previously voiced by students who had been selected to participate in the teams were representative of the opinions of the students of their respective schools. The participants were then handed two folders, each concerning one target student (normative target and deviant target) who, ostensibly, had participated in a recent discussion. Each folder contained information about the target's school and the target's opinion about the involvement of students in the evaluation of the Bologna Process. In the folder concerning the normative target, there was also information about the target's position on the participation of ingroup students (commitment manipulation).

## Group

The targets were presented as either studying in the same school as the participant (ingroup condition) or in the other school (outgroup condition).

## Targets' Position

The normative target endorsed a socially desirable position ("University students should be involved in the evaluation of the Bologna Process"), while the deviant target endorsed a socially undesirable position ("University students are not mature enough to participate in the evaluation of the Bologna Process"). These positions were adapted from Pinto et al. (2010).

## Commitment

Participants learned that the normative target either supported or opposed the involvement of own-school students in that process. In the ambiguous condition, the normative target agreed with the normative position, but stated that "the students of my school should not take part in this process or become members of the student committee that will represent our university." In the unambiguous condition, participants read no statement by the normative target<sup>1</sup>.

## Measures

Participants responded to three sets of questions tapping social identification, agreement with targets' position, and targets' evaluation, respectively.

### Social Identification

In order to control for a priori differences in social identification, participants responded to the following questions (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *completely*):

- "How competent are the other students in your school?"
- "How similar are you to the other students in your school?"

- "As a student, how representative of your school do you consider yourself to be?"
- "How much do you identify with your school?"

We averaged the responses to the four items to compute a social identification score (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ ).

### Agreement with Targets' Position

After the experimental manipulations, we asked the participants: "How much do you agree with Student A's/B's (normative/deviant) position?" (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*).

### Evaluation of Targets

The participants evaluated the targets on five 7-point scales (1 = *bad fellow, unreasonable, selfish, boring, disloyal*; 7 = *good fellow, reasonable, altruistic, stimulating, loyal*). For each participant, we averaged the evaluations of each target with respect to these traits to create a normative target score (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ) and a deviant target score (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ).

## Results

### Social Identification

On average, participants identified with the ingroup,  $M = 5.36$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ . A  $2 \times 2$  (Group [ingroup, outgroup]  $\times$  Commitment [unambiguous, ambiguous]) ANOVA on the social identification score yielded a significant effect of group,  $F(1, 44) = 5.51$ ,  $p = .023$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .111$  (remaining effects  $F_s < 3.09$ ,  $p_s \geq .086$ ,  $\eta_p^2 \leq .066$ ). We, thus, controlled for potential effects of a priori differences in social identification on all of our dependent measures using a regression analysis (Muller, Yzerbyt, & Judd, 2008). The regression analysis revealed no significant effects of social identification on the model terms (lowest  $B = -0.43$ ,  $SE = 0.41$ ,  $\beta = -.21$ ,  $p = .303$ ). Social identification did not significantly change any effects on the dependent measures.

<sup>1</sup> It could be argued that participants perceive the unambiguous normative member as being more normative than the ambiguous normative member. In this case, participants' judgments would be influenced by the normative character instead of the group representativeness of the normative member. In order to assure the meaning of commitment manipulation, we conducted a postexperimental study in which we manipulated the commitment of normative ingroup targets and measured the perceived normativeness and ingroup representativeness of these targets. We expected both normative targets to be perceived as being equally normative, and the ambiguous normative targets as being less representative of the group, suggesting that they are less central to the group. The results supported our expectations: for target's normativeness: ambiguous condition ( $M = 5.41$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ), unambiguous condition ( $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ),  $t(48) = 0.18$ ,  $p = .417$ ,  $d = 0.06$ , 95% CI  $[-0.41, 0.97]$ ; for target's representativeness: ambiguous condition ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ), unambiguous condition ( $M = 5.04$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ),  $t(48) = 2.20$ ,  $p = .033$ ,  $d = 0.64$ , 95% CI  $[0.07, 1.53]$ . Thus, the commitment manipulation has an impact on the participants' perception of how representative of the group the target is and not on how normative he/she is.

## Agreement With Targets' Position

We expected participants in the ingroup/unambiguous condition to agree more with the normative targets' position, and to disagree more with the deviant targets' position, than participants in the remaining conditions would. To test this, we ran a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  (Group [ingroup, outgroup]  $\times$  Commitment [unambiguous, ambiguous]  $\times$  Targets' Position [normative, deviant]) ANOVA on agreement with the normative and deviant targets' position scores (see Table 1). We found a significant effect of agreement,  $F(1, 44) = 80.92, p < .001, \eta^2 = .648$ , showing that participants agreed more with the normative ( $M = 5.47, SD = 1.34$ ) than with the deviant target ( $M = 3.34, SD = 1.23$ ). In addition, in partial support of our prediction, the significant Commitment  $\times$  Targets' Position interaction,  $F(1, 44) = 15.38, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .259$ , shows that participants agreed less with the normative target in the ambiguous than in the unambiguous condition ( $M = 4.82, SD = 1.44$ , and  $M = 6.13, SD = 0.84$ ), respectively,  $t(46) = 3.87, p < .001, d = 1.14, 95\% \text{ CI } [-2.00, -0.63]$ . However, contrary to what we expected, there was no difference in agreement with the deviant target in the ambiguous versus unambiguous conditions,  $t(46) = 1.50, p = .140, d = 0.44, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.18, 1.23]$ . The remaining effects were nonsignificant ( $F_{\text{always}} \leq 2.57, ps \geq .116, \eta_p^2 \leq .032$ ).

**Table 1.** Means (and standard deviations) of agreement with targets' position as a function of group and commitment

Commitment	Target	Group	
		Ingroup	Outgroup
Ambiguous	Normative	4.86 (1.67)	4.79 (1.31)
	Deviant	3.63 (0.66)	3.58 (1.44)
Unambiguous	Normative	6.65 (0.45)	5.69 (0.86)
	Deviant	2.95 (1.23)	3.18 (1.34)

We did not obtain a significant full interaction. However, the mean pattern of results obtained across conditions was consistent with our hypothesis, especially regarding agreement with the normative target. We thus conducted independent-sample  $t$ -tests between conditions (all possible combinations), which showed that participants agreed more with the normative target in the ingroup/unambiguous condition than in the remaining conditions,  $t(23) = 4.49, p < .001, d = 1.87, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.05, 2.72]$ . Conversely, the obtained pattern of results did not support our prediction that participants would agree less with the deviant target in the ingroup/unambiguous condition than in all other conditions ( $t_{\text{always}} \leq 1.56, p \geq .136, d = 0.72, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.59, 0.23]$ ).

In sum, these results provide partial support for our hypothesis. Specifically, they indicate that participants tended to agree more with a normative ingroup member with an unambiguous position than with a normative ingroup member with an ambiguous position or any normative outgroup member.

## Evaluation of Targets

We only expected to observe the black sheep effect in the unambiguous condition. Therefore, we predicted that the deviant ingroup target would be evaluated less negatively, and the normative ingroup target evaluated less positively, in the ambiguous as compared to the unambiguous condition. To test these predictions, we conducted a  $2 \times 2$  (Group [ingroup, outgroup]  $\times$  Commitment [unambiguous, ambiguous]) ANOVA on the normative and deviant targets' scores (see Table 2). This analysis yielded a significant effect of targets' position,  $F(1, 44) = 24.80, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .360$ , and significant interactions between Commitment  $\times$  Targets' Position,  $F(1, 44) = 10.70, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .196$ , and Group  $\times$  Commitment  $\times$  Targets' Position,  $F(1, 44) = 15.23, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .257$ . The effects of Group, Commitment, and the interactions between Group  $\times$  Targets' Position as well as Group  $\times$  Commitment ( $F_{\text{always}} \leq 2.36, ps \geq .132, \eta_p^2 \leq .051$ ) were not significant.

**Table 2.** Means (and standard deviations) of evaluation of targets as a function of group and commitment

Commitment	Target	Group	
		Ingroup	Outgroup
Ambiguous	Normative	5.02 (1.44)	4.84 (1.00)
	Deviant	5.11 (1.19)	4.29 (1.10)
Unambiguous	Normative	5.81 (1.01)	4.88 (0.75)
	Deviant	3.94 (0.62)	4.50 (0.78)

The significant effect of targets' position shows that participants evaluated the normative target more favorably ( $M = 5.11, SD = 1.09$ ) than the deviant target ( $M = 4.44, SD = 1.00$ ). Moreover, the interaction between Commitment  $\times$  Targets' Position shows that participants' evaluations of the normative ( $M = 5.31, SD = 0.98$ ) and deviant ( $M = 4.24, SD = 0.75$ ) targets only differed in the unambiguous condition,  $t(23) = 4.94, p < .001, d = 1.23, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.62, 1.51]$ . In the ambiguous condition, the differences between their evaluations of the normative target ( $M = 4.92, SD = 1.18$ ) and the deviant target ( $M = 4.63, SD = 1.19$ ) were not significant,  $t(23) = 1.26, p = .220, d = 0.24, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.18, 0.76]$ .

In order to test our black sheep hypothesis, we decomposed the significant Group  $\times$  Commitment  $\times$  Targets' Position interaction according to the commitment factor. As expected, Group  $\times$  Targets' Position was significant in the unambiguous condition,  $F(1, 45) = 11.14, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .198$ , but not in the ambiguous condition,  $F(1, 45) = 1.36, p = .249, \eta_p^2 = .029$ . In addition, as predicted, in the unambiguous condition, participants evaluated the ingroup normative target more positively ( $M = 5.81, SD = 1.01$ ) than the outgroup normative target ( $M = 4.88, SD = 0.75$ ),  $t(22) = 2.57, p = .017, d = 1.10, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.18, 1.67]$ . The deviant ingroup target ( $M = 3.94, SD = 0.62$ ) tended to be evaluated more negatively than the outgroup de-



viant target ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ),  $t(22) = 1.92$ ,  $p = .068$ ,  $d = 0.82$ , 95% CI  $[-1.17, 0.44]$ .

We also decomposed the interaction according to the group factor. Commitment  $\times$  Targets' Position was significant in the ingroup condition,  $F(1, 45) = 22.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .336$ , but not in the outgroup condition,  $F(1, 45) = 0.19$ ,  $p = .667$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .004$ . Participants evaluated the normative ingroup target positively, regardless of the targets' commitment,  $t(19) = 1.47$ ,  $p = .159$ ,  $d = 0.67$ , 95% CI  $[-1.92, 0.34]$  (unambiguous condition,  $M = 5.81$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ; ambiguous condition,  $M = 5.02$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ). Moreover, as predicted, participants evaluated the deviant ingroup target more positively in the ambiguous condition ( $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) than in the unambiguous condition ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ),  $t(19) = 2.87$ ,  $p = .010$ ,  $d = 1.32$ , 95% CI  $[0.32, 2.02]$ . These results fully support our predictions. The participants only evaluated normative ingroup members more positively and deviant ingroup members more negatively than their respective outgroup counterparts (the black sheep pattern) when the normative member was perceived as being committed to the ingroup. Moreover, deviant ingroup members were only evaluated more negatively when they were presented with an unambiguous normative member.

## Association Between Agreement with Targets' Position and Evaluation of Targets

We predicted that the association between participants' differential agreement with the normative and deviant targets and differential evaluation of these same targets would be stronger in the ingroup/unambiguous condition than in the other conditions. The correlations between these two scores within experimental conditions are consistent with this prediction. In the ingroup/unambiguous condition, the more participants disagreed with the deviant target and agreed with the normative target, the more their evaluations of these targets differed,  $r = .59$ ,  $p = .055$ ,  $N = 11$  (remaining conditions:  $r_{\text{always}} < .14$ ,  $ns$ ). This suggests that agreement with the normative and deviant positions is associated with targets' evaluations, especially when the normative ingroup member is perceived as being committed to the group.

## Discussion

The results support our prediction that participants would agree more with an opinion espoused by a normative ingroup target with an unambiguous as compared to ambiguous position. However, the results do not support our prediction that participants would disagree more with the deviant ingroup target when presented with a normative ingroup target with an

unambiguous position. These results indicate that uncommitted normative targets are not sufficient to trigger an opinion change toward the deviant opinion, but enhance the positive influential role of an unambiguous normative member to potentiate adherence to the normative position.

Regarding evaluations of the targets, the results support the idea that participants are more lenient toward deviant ingroup members when these members emerge in parallel with ambiguous normative ingroup members: We only observed a black sheep effect when there was unambiguous normative support for the ingroup. Furthermore, the deviant ingroup target was evaluated more positively in the ambiguous than in the unambiguous condition. Finally, the positive association between evaluative differentiation and the difference in agreement with the normative and the deviant targets found in the ingroup/unambiguous condition suggests that it was in this condition that participants more strongly attempted to validate the normative position.

Taken together, the results offer preliminary, yet compelling, evidence in support of the idea that, when people are faced with deviant ingroup members, their reaction to them depends on the extent to which normative ingroup members are referential by supporting the ingroup position and thereby showing their commitment to the group. Their commitment seems to facilitate participants' tendency to address the nefarious effects of deviance by evaluating the normative ingroup targets positively and the deviant ingroup targets negatively while simultaneously increasing their agreement with the normative position in question. Conversely, people may be willing to tolerate deviant members when the group lacks the necessary normative support provided by committed members.

Previous research only found the black sheep effect when both the normative and the deviant targets were highly representative ingroup members (Pinto et al., 2010). The present work extends Pinto et al.'s findings by showing that participants' evaluations of deviant members were more negative when the normative position was supported by a committed group member. However, when the normative group member held an ambiguous position, participants showed more leniency toward the deviant member. Thus, the attitudinal (commitment) component is an important factor in determining whether the group has unambiguous and sufficient normative support to highlight the prescriptive attribute of the violated norm and thus to react to deviance. Our results support the idea that normative members who are less committed to the group might not be enough to trigger the black sheep effect. In turn, they may result in lenient judgments of deviant members. Although ambiguous normative members are not sufficient to trigger opinion change toward the deviant position, they result in tolerance for deviant positions.

These results may have important implications for SGDT, which inspired the present study, as well as for our understanding of reactions to deviance. SGDT proposes that, in the presence of deviant ingroup members, individuals try to re-establish



the group's positive value by engaging in behavior that results in the black sheep effect (Marques et al., 1988). Although recent research has focused on the conditions in which deviant ingroup members are tolerated (e.g., Abrams, Randsley de Moura, & Travaglino, 2013; see also Abrams, Randsley de Moura, Marques, & Hutchison, 2008; Randsley de Moura & Abrams, 2013), this research did not investigate the impact of normative members on the evaluation of deviant group members. Our results suggest that group members' recognition that normative members are committed to the ingroup is crucial for their commitment to protecting the group against the risks of deviance, both by evaluating deviant members negatively and increasing their adherence to the norms violated by deviant members. Although more conclusive research is clearly required to elucidate this issue, the present study offers a potentially valuable extension to SGDT and to our understanding of the processes involved in the way groups react to deviance.

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